

What's the **Number One Killer** of Sailors?

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As I drove home from the Naval Safety Center on a sunny February afternoon, I saw some things that made me realize why we lose so many Sailors to traffic accidents. Here's what happened.

It was about 1630 on a nice, clear and sunny day. Eastbound traffic on I-64 leaving the naval base was heavy. There were no crashes blocking traffic, but it was still stop-and-go. You know, 55 mph one minute, dead stop the next. Got the picture? Great!

From what I've just described, you should realize driving in that type of traffic requires 100 percent of a driver's attention. A one-second distraction while traffic is moving (to adjust your radio, for instance) could result in your having to make a panic stop to avoid hitting the cars in front of you that suddenly have come to a stop.

I was traveling in the center lane in this stop-and-go traffic when I noticed the car to my left was weaving a bit. Out the corner of my eye, I would see the car inch closer to my car, then drift back the other way. I slowed a bit to let this car get ahead of me, and when it passed, I saw the driver trying to read a large piece of paper she was holding over the steering wheel. At the same time, she was extending the antenna on a cell phone, using her teeth and her right hand. My first thought was, "I need to stay as far away from this lady as possible, because she's going to cause an accident!" I dropped back several car lengths and went to "full alert."

As we traveled down the interstate at about 55 mph for what seemed to be a mile or two, I saw brake lights ahead. Indeed, traffic was stopped about an eighth of a mile ahead. Anybody who was focused on the situation would be able to



stop in plenty of time. But the driver in the left lane trying to read a sheet of paper and dial a cell phone while driving didn't see the brake lights.

I began to brace for a nasty collision (even though I was not the one who was going to get hit). She got closer and closer, no brake lights, no brake lights, then, finally, she looked up and saw the rear end of the car in front of her rapidly approaching. She jammed on her brakes, and the back end of her car went up (a sure sign of a panic stop), but her tires did not lock up (she must have had anti-lock brakes). The car following this driver was a little too close, and when the distracted driver began the panic stop, the second driver had to jam on the brakes, too. The distracted driver stopped just inches from the car ahead of her. The car behind her locked up its brakes and skidded sideways into my lane, but managed to stop without hitting the distracted driver. The third car in line just drove onto the left shoulder to avoid the mess. Amazing—no collisions!

I drove away wondering if that driver had learned a lesson about driving while distracted. I also wondered if the others had



learned a lesson about following too closely. My guess is, they did not. Dialing and talking on a cell phone are not the only things that distract a driver. Looking at a map, eating french fries, putting on make-up, adjusting the radio or tape/CD player, are just a few other things that people do. Anything that takes your focus from driving, even for just a second, can result in a crash.

And, as you may know, traffic wrecks are the leading killers of Sailors. In the last five years, we've lost 331 to them. That's enough to crew two *Ohio*-class submarines. For that same period, more than 80 percent of the submariners who died in crashes were stationed in Kings Bay, Ga.

What can be done to reduce these needless fatalities? Should it be against the law to drive while distracted? I believe all drivers must be made aware of the potential results of driving while distracted,

fatigued, or intoxicated. They need encouragement to avoid these circumstances at all costs. This is where a good traffic-safety program comes in.

Unfortunately, too many commands have not implemented such a program—a real shame, since so many resources are readily available to anyone who wants to make a difference. The Navy's recently revised traffic-safety program instruction is OpNavInst. 5100.12G. One of the best resources (I have to admit, I am biased) is the Naval Safety Center. From the motor-vehicle home page on the Safety Center Web site (www.safetycenter.navy.mil), you can find everything necessary to design and implement a highly effective traffic-safety program.

With effort and a pinch of common sense, we should be able to reduce the number of Sailors who needlessly die or suffer horrendous injuries in their motor vehicles. ☺

Where Do You Want Your Coffee?

By AT2 Brian Dale,
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It was another hot day in the Arabian Gulf. What I didn't know was that it soon was going to get a lot hotter—scalding, in fact.

We were four months into a WestPac cruise, and all I could think about was going home. When I arrived at the shop that morning, I decided to make a pot of coffee—not the usual “boat” stuff, but a pot of beloved Starbucks. My only problem was a short cord on the pot. “I could get an extension cord,” I thought, “but what the heck, who needs an extension cord? I'll just set the pot on top of this floppy-disk holder.”

After filling the pot with water and a scoop too many of grounds, it was time to relax and wait for

the coffee to brew. I sat down beside the desk and started reading a magazine while whistling a coffee jingle from a few years ago. In short order, though, I was whistling a new tune.

I'm not sure if I hit the pot with my shoulder, the ship turned and listed slightly, or a jet went screaming down the catapult a few feet above our shop. Whatever the cause, I soon felt hot coffee spilling onto my shoulder and down my back. It was a rush like I never before had experienced. My back soon sounded like a steak sizzling on the grill. I jumped into the air—very colorfully, I might add—and managed to put some distance between me and the beast that was trying to cook me alive.

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Shipmates quickly pulled off my stained white jersey, and I removed my shirt. By this time, everyone was urging me to go to medical, but I refused to bother a corpsman with a “measly coffee burn.” Besides, as I explained, “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

My aviation medical officer (AMO), who saw the fiasco, though, insisted that I go to medical.

“No, sir,” I countered, “I’m fine. I feel only a slight sting.”

“Yes, that’s nice,” the AMO said. “Now, let’s go to medical.”

As this conversation continued, I followed the AMO into a passageway to explain that I really was OK. “Sir, really, I’m fine. It’s just a coffee burn.”

“It will get worse. Come on, let’s go,” the AMO insisted.

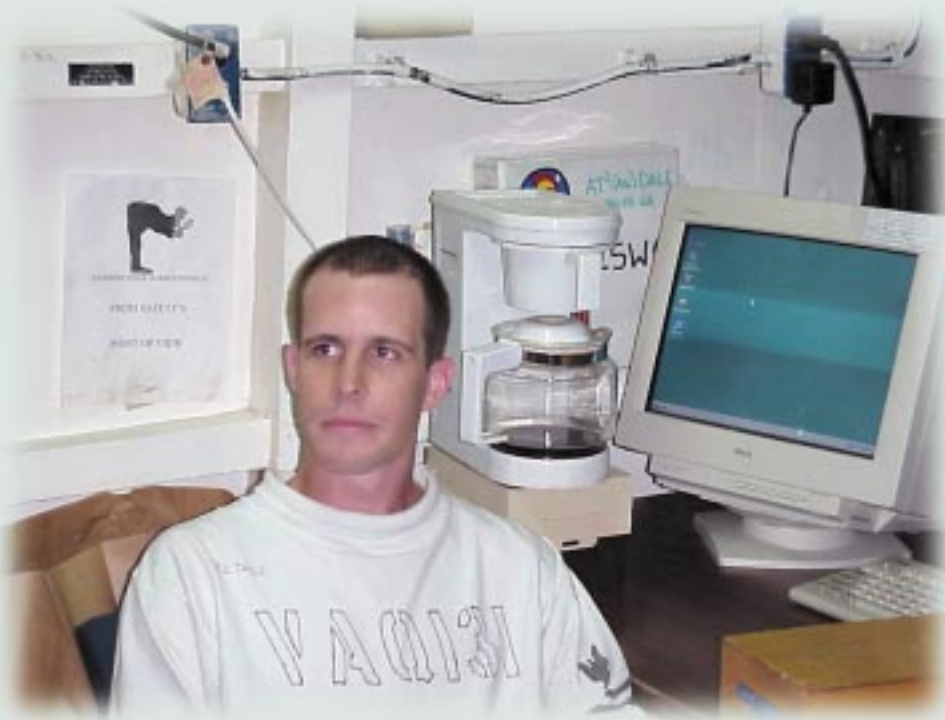
“Sir... ouch... It’s just a first-degree... owwww... If that...” I argued, as the pain started hitting me. It had been about five minutes since the coffee had spilled on me, and I was having second thoughts. Soon, I couldn’t stand the pain any longer, and I agreed to accompany the AMO to medical. “All right, sir, I’ll go, but let’s hurry... Can we hurry, please?”

As the AMO and I started to a head below for some cold water, one of my PO1s took over the duty of escorting me to medical. When we got to the emergency room, I had to explain why I was there, and the corpsmen looked at me like I was an idiot as I told the story. A bandage and a chit for a day of light duty later, I was back with my shipmates, getting used to the new nickname they had for me—“Burny.”

What did I learn from this incident? There are several things I could have done to prevent it.

Ergonomics. Don’t put a coffee pot on anything besides a desktop or other flat, solid surface.

Environmental awareness. Did I know the coffee pot was right behind me? Yes. However, I



“All right, sir, I’ll go, but let’s hurry . . . Can we hurry, please?”

was concerned only with relaxing and waiting for the coffee to brew.

Shipboard life. My shop is on the 03 level, right below catapult No. 4. The bangs and shakes from aircraft launching and the ship turning were enough to knock a coffee pot over, especially one that wasn’t resting on a solid base.

Laziness. I have to admit I was very lazy. It maybe would have taken five minutes to get an extension cord. Instead, though, I decided to make the pot’s cord reach, by whatever means necessary.

As a quality-assurance observer on the flight deck, I often see people do stupid things. Guess what, though? That “stupid” club has a new member. The way to prevent these kinds of mistakes is to think about what you’re doing *before* you do it. ☺